Truth and the Santa Claus Moment

COREY HARBAUGH

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I believe our lives are condensed into moments like this one: my son Tucker approached me at the grill where I was focused on fire and dinner, unaware that his eight-year-old mind was struggling for the right words to fit around a question. Finally, he spoke: "Dad, if I asked you if it was you who bought presents at Christmas instead of Santa, would you tell me?"

I heard questions within questions: is there a Santa Claus, what is Christmas if there isn't, and, most important, can I trust you to tell me the truth, Dad? At the heart of each question I heard my son asking if he could still believe what he had believed all his life.

I couldn't answer him just then because his six-year-old sister and five-year-old, soon-to-be stepbrother were playing nearby in the yard, and also because I couldn't turn from the grill to look fully into his eyes like I wanted to for as long as it took both of us to understand.

How we answer these questions matters, and though we spend hours and days and weeks and years trying to figure out the answers, we only get to live them out in small moments. This was one of those moments, for both of us.

All of my life I have tried to put words around the questions about what I believe, and have found that the answers to my biggest questions have no words. They have moments. Like noticing the nun who wept while she prayed in St. Peter's, an island of quiet faith surrounded by a sea of noisy tourists. Like the upwelling of pride and fear when my daughter took to her bike the first time, her legs pumping her steady, and steadily away from me. Like burying my grandfather on the same day my son was born. Like sitting around the coffee table with my children and their mother two years prior, watching their faces come short of comprehending the word "divorce."

That night after dinner I took Tuck for a bike ride, and we sat on a grassy hill drinking a soda, watching the orange sun sink behind a line of trees. I brought up his question from the grill. "Tuck, earlier you asked me about Santa."

He stopped me. "Don't answer me, Dad. I think I know the answer, and right now I just want something to believe in."

I turned to my son and was able to finally look into his big eyes. "Tucker, your question was if you asked me about Santa, would I tell you, and my answer is yes. If you ask, I will tell you."

He considered this a moment, smiled, and before he drank the last swallow of soda pop he told me easily, "Then I'm not going to ask."

That was good enough for both of us. For now. There will be other questions like this to come, no doubt. They, too, will have their moments.

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